New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1952

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1952 PRODUCTIONS
Premieres in Other Years

Original Reviews Appeared In These Volumes

1951 Vol.

Stage Play	*Page*
Antony and Cleopatra	132
Bagels and Yox	238
Caesar and Cleopatra	135
Constant Wife (The)	149
*Don Juan in Hell	193
*Fourposter (The)	190
*Gigi	159
Glad Tidings	212
*I Am a Camera	156
*King and I (The)	304
Legend of Lovers	125
Lo and Behold!	143
*Moon Is Blue (The)	322
Nina	152
Number (The)	186
*Paint Your Wagon	172
*Point of No Return	140
Remains To Be Seen	223
Saint Joan	220
*Stalag 17	274
*Top Banana	180
Two on the Aisle	246
Wild Duck (The)	128

1950 Vol.

Affairs of State	267
Call Me Madam	243
*Guys and Dolls	185

1949 Vol.

*South Pacific	312

1948 Vol.

Kiss Me, Kate (return engagement)	91

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of May 5, 1952*

1952 PRODUCTIONS
Reviews Appear in This Volume

Premieres During 1952

Stage Play	*Page*
Anna Christie	395
Brass Ring (The)	319
*Candida	307
"Charles Dickens"	371
*Chase (The)	315
Collector's Item	368
Come of Age	382
Dear Barbarians	356
Desire Under the Elms	386
Fancy Meeting You Again	392
Flight Into Egypt	341
Four Saints in Three Acts	312
Gertie	379
Golden Boy	344
Grass Harp (The)	328
Hook 'n Ladder	300
Jane	376
Long Watch (The)	335
*Male Animal (The)	297
*Mrs. McThing	359
*Much Ado About Nothing	294
One Bright Day	338
*Pal Joey	398
*Paris '90	348
*Shrike (The)	389
*Three Wishes for Jamie	332
*To Be Continued	304
Venus Observed	364
Women of Twilight	351
CRITICS' CIRCLE AWARD	322

Theatre Openings

"Hook 'n Ladder" "The Male Animal"
"Much Ado About Nothing"

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of May 5, 1952*

Theatre Critics' Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York newspapers.

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"Much Ado About Nothing"

Daily Mirror

May 2, 1952

'Much Ado' Revival Is Lacking in Unity

By ROBERT COLEMAN

"Much Ado About Nothing" is seldom given in New York. In fact, it has been presented previously but three times since the turn of the century, except in repertory. That's quite understandable because it is one of William Shakespeare's lesser works. The master was in a slump when he penned it, or else he needed a few fast bucks from a quickie.

The Luther Greene-Jerry Tishman revival at the Music Box does nothing much for the ailing script. It represents a mixture of acting styles. It lacks unity of mood. It seems a case of everyone for himself, and don't get lost in the shuffle. According to the program, it was directed by Anthony Eustrel, who also acts Benedick.

Eustrel proves a mediocre traffic cop. His players romp through red lights with gusto. They do pretty much as they please on stage. Each in his own fashion. The visiting megaphoner should hand out a few tickets.

Eustrel and Claire Luce did Benedick and Beatrice at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, Stratford-on-Avon, in the Summer of 1945. So this is in the nature of a repeat engagement for them. Miss Luce is easy on the eyes and archly bouncy as the shrewish Beatrice. She gave too generously of her energy much of the evening, and was most effective when she resorted to restraint in some of the second act.

Eustrel's Benedick is on the cute side, and quite uneven. Frankly, his first performance over here is disappointing. Deirdre Owens is lovely to watch, and acts with engaging simplicy as Hero. Eric Sinclair is a handsome though uninspired Claudio, Jay Robinson and Carl Harbord are victimized by the villains, Borachio and Don John.

Ernest Graves, Evan Thomas and John W. Austin are straightforward and dignified as Don Pedro, Antonio and Leonato. Edward Van Sickle displays a good voice as Balthazar, the singer. But it is the ever-wonderful Melville Cooper, who runs away with the evening's few honors, as Dogberry, the Elizabethan ancestor of Mrs. Malaprop.

Cooper's rowdy slapsticking, abetted by Nat Burns and Barry Macollum, really woke the customers up. That is, those among them who had been trying to catch a nap on the sly. Your unfortunate drama reporter suffered with insomnia, so he caught it all. Even when the robustious Cooper was absent from the stage.

The usually dependable Stewart Chaney has designed a gaudy and tasteless production. As if that weren't enough, he has lit it badly.

The Music Box Theatre, in our opinion, is not a very happy spot in which to be these nights. For "Much Ado About Nothing" represents a lot of nice and gifted people at their worst in a seldom-rewarding comedy.

"MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING"

Play by William Shakespeare; staged by Antony Eustrel; scenery and costumes by Stewart Chaney; music by Raffaello de Banfield; presented by Luther Greene in association with Jerry Tishman at the Music Box Theatre, May 1, 1952. The cast:

Hero.....Deirdre Owens
Margaret.....Peggy Nelson
A Boy.....Herbert Coleman
Messenger.....Preston Hanson
Ursula.....Raimonda Orselli
Leonato.....John W. Austin
Beatrice.....Claire Luce
Don Pedro.....Ernest Graves
Benedick.....Antony Eustrel
Claudio.....Eric Sinclair
Don John.....Carl Harbord
Conrade.....Bruce Barlow
Balthazar.....Edward Van Sickle
Borachio.....Jay Robinson
Antonio.....Evan Thomas
1st Watchman.....John Giroux
2nd Watchman.....Carl Harms
Verges.....Barry Macollum
Dogberry.....Melville Cooper
Friar.....Joseph Macaulay
Sexton.....Nat Burns

NEW YORK **Herald Tribune**

May 2, 1952

'Much Ado About Nothing'

By WALTER F. KERR

THERE was a lot of laughter at the Music Box last night, but unfortunately it was all on the stage. The Luther Greene-Jerry Tishman production of "Much Ado About Nothing," is one of those giddy Shakespearean funfests in which the actors seem to be having a high old time.

No entrance is ever made without a ripple—sometimes two ripples—of silvery laughter preceding it from the wings. When one of the characters feels that he has a funny line, he chortles his way through it with such strangulated merriment that you fear for an imminent apoplexy. When the characters are not laughing at their own lines they are laughing at each other's, doubling up in absolute fits of hilarity and joyously pounding one another on the back. The climax to all this gayety comes at the end of the first act, when the principal comedienne lets loose a barrage of solo giggles backed up by a flute from the orchestra.

Meantime, all of the genuine character humor, and the really dazzling wit of the play, has vanished from the face of the earth. "Much Ado About Nothing" is easily the most sophisticated of Shakespeare's comedies, by all odds the funniest. But you'd never have guessed it from the goings-on Thursday night.

The famous love duel between Beatrice and Benedick, who cannot help insulting one another and who must be tricked into revealing their hearts, is in a vein of high comedy we still recognize—a flashing play of acid and mocking impudence which is downright contemporary. Claire Luce and Anthony Eustrel reduce it to an arch, wheezing, and sometimes incredibly sentimental bore.

Miss Luce smirks coyly, grimaces furiously to indicate where the laughs should be, and in general behaves as though it were her solemn duty to rescue, by sheer vigor, a third-rate piece of writing. Beatrice, the waspish lass who was born to speak 'all mirth and no matter,' is some one to whom wit is second nature, some one whose tongue is deft and swift and graceful. Miss Luce batters at the lines, broadens them mercilessly, finally beats them to death. And when she is in sentimental vein—she ends one fabulously comic scene on her knees in prayerful supplication—she cuddles a line and curdles your blood in a single artless stroke.

Mr. Eustrel is a bit better, but not much. He does finally drain two laughs out of Benedick's masterful soliloquy in which he pompously decides that "the world must be peopled." But in general his is a curiously bouncy, slightly prim, and thoroughly self-conscious performance, marked from time to time with a tendency to purr over words he particularly likes.

If any one salvages anything out of a relentlessly obtuse evening, it is Melville Cooper as Constable Dogberry. Mr. Cooper happily softens the well-known malaprop-isms, and he suggests the beginnings of a valid characterization in his benevolent patronizing of old Verges. But the comedian is hemmed in by Mr. Eustrel's conventional and labored staging—the stage movement seems to have been chalked in for the actors—and he is unable to rescue either the charge to the guard or the trial scene which wraps up the play's wandering plot.

Stewart Chaney has backed the play with the sort of postal card settings which characterized, but did not distinguish, the late nineteenth century. And though his costumes are rich and colorful, they, too, descend into the heavy-handed vulgarity of the production as a whole; notably in the low farce style of Benedick's garb when he decides to spruce himself up.

All in all, the case for Shakespeare has not been especially strengthened.

New York Post

May 2, 1952

By Richard Watts Jr.

Whatever Became of 'Much Ado'?

It may be giving away an embarrassing professional secret to confess to you that, when I went to the Music Box last night, I had never attended a performance of Shakespeare's "Much Ado About Nothing," although I had long wanted to. And, now that I have sat dutifully and rather wistfully through the handsome and industrious production that was being put on there for the first time, I still doubt if I have ever seen "Much Ado About Nothing," and, more than ever, I would like to. It is my impression that it might prove a striking and exceptionally interesting comedy of wits and manners.

It certainly was not from lack of trying on the part of producers and actors that the proceedings at the Music Box seemed so dim a reflection of what Shakespeare wrote. Physically, there is almost everything present that there should be, thanks to the colorful settings and costumes provided by Stewart Chaney. In addition, there is the always admirable Melville Cooper to play the celebrated comic role of Dogberry, one of the few Shakespearean clowns who seems funny to modern audiences. Also on hand, in bravely determined fashion, are Claire Luce as Beatrice and Antony Eustrel, an English visitor, as Benedick.

The sad truth, however, is that the resulting play seems flat, humorless and rather pointless. I suppose the clue is that the actors almost invariably make their entrances and exits laughing uproariously, which is a fatal sign in the production of a Shakespearean comedy. Somehow, it is better to have the laughter issue from the audience, and I think that is just where it would come from if the circumstances were happier. For "Much Ado About Nothing" is, there is reason to believe, a really witty and sardonic play, and, with the likely exception of "Measure for Measure," the most "modern" of its author's works.

Amid more comfortable surroundings, I am sure that Mr. Cooper would be a more effective Dogberry than he was last night, but, even as it is, he is the chief comfort of the current performance. The foolish but faithful constable is not only the runner-up to the mighty Falstaff as the greatest of Shakespeare's comic creations, but a very sweet, lovable and earnest fellow, and Mr. Cooper captures his engaging qualities admirably. It is, of course, one of the happiest features of the plot that, in the end, Dogberry, his loyal aide, Verges, and the clownish members of the watch prove the most sensible people in the play.

Speaking Prose

The discovery by Moliere's famous bourgeois gentleman that he had been speaking prose could hardly have surprised him more than a modern audience is to find that most of "Much Ado" is likewise in prose. It is prose that is witty, satirical and highly sophisticated, with a curious Shavian quality about it, and to find a brilliantly sardonic comedy deprived of most of its hilarity is a depressing experience. The way the actors keep on laughing indicates that they suspect they are up to something richly comic, but I'm afraid that is the only indication you have that "Much Ado" is supposed to be, among other things, funny.

Miss Luce and Mr. Eustrel are credited with scoring personal hits in their roles in London, and the English critics and playgoers are presumably given to adhering to a severe Shakespearean standard, but it seemed to me that both players failed to get the wit, the charm and the high spirits out of the distinguished parts they were playing. Claudio, the juvenile, is a mean-spirited fellow, and Hero, the luckless ingenue, is a fairly spiritless victim, and not so much was to be expected from them, but Beatrice and Benedick should seem far more delightful people than the current presentation makes them. I'm still waiting for "Much Ado."

Journal American

May 2, 1952

Some Fetching Bits; An Amiable Play

By JOHN McCLAIN

THE local first-night communicants were given an injection of culture last evening at the Music Box Theatre with a production of "Much Ado About Nothing," from the quill of William ("The Bard") Shakespeare, and I would judge that most of them came away with a mildly positive reaction.

This is certainly not one of the old master's most popular products, although it has its fetching moments, and I am sure it has been more skilfully produced and performed elsewhere. Even so, it is far from a squandered evening—especially in these dog days of a dreary season.

The mounting is bright and imaginative, there are flights of speech in The Bard's best tradition, and there are a couple of notable characterizations. If you're a true Shakespeare fan I believe you'll have a pleasant time at the Music Box.

* * *

Double Romance

"MUCH ADO" is a double-romance drama involving a couple of soldiers home from the wars; one, a naive stripling, quickly falls in love with the local heiress, and the other, infinitely sophisticated, protests his disregard for womankind the while he becomes quietly enmeshed with the heiress's cousin.

It isn't as simple as that, of course, because a real meanie comes over the horison and plants a nasty story with the young warrior, something to do with the chastity of his intended.

As a result the young man renounces his fiancee publicly in church. She faints, the young man stalks out, and the word is passed that she has actually died of remorse.

This leads to no end of trouble. The elder soldier challenges his young friend to a duel, old loyalties are dissolved, but at the crucial moment the constable comes up with the crook.

In the final stanza the young hero discovers that his girl is alive and innocent and ready to take another shot at the marriage ceremony. And everybody lives happily thereafter.

* * *

On the Other Hand...

EVEN FROM THIS FRAGMENTARY report it can be judged that this is not Willie's most ingenious effort. There are many plot points which can hardly be dismissed on a basis of Shakespearean license and there is a lot of talk which is neither relevant nor good enough to justify the time.

One episode puzzled me particularly: right or wrong the young hero thinks his betrothed has died as a result of his accusations in church. Yet the next day we find him laughing and kidding around as though he had just hit the Daily Double at Belmont. Callous, I call it.

For performances I would give the nod to Claire Luce, Antony Eustrel (who also directed), Melville Cooper, Ernest Graves and John W. Austin.

The sets, costumes and lighting by Stewart Chaney were simple, practical and pleasant and Raffaello daBanfield's incidental music was charming and unobtrusive.

By and large it's an amiable enterprise; in any case the author ought to be encouraged.

The New York Times

May 2, 1952

Claire Luce in a Revival of Shakespeare's 'Much Ado About Nothing'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Since "Much Ado About Nothing" is an old classic, we must be vigitant and treat it with all respect. But it is not much older than one theatregoer feels after sitting through the production that opened at the Music Box last evening. Having played Beatrice at Stratford in 1945, Claire Luce is playing her on Broadway in 1952 with Antony Eustrel, who was her Benedick seven years ago. Mr. Eustrel has staged the production.

As the contrary lovers of Shakespeare's romantic comedy, Miss Luce and Mr. Eustrel have their moments of wit and raillery. But the bright moments are spaced pretty far apart in an obsolete, pedestrian production that has no point of view. Apart from the fact that it gets Miss Luce and Mr. Eustrel on the stage, and also Melville Cooper, who plays a wide and modern Dogberry, the revival serves no dramatic purpose. A lot of Americans were brought up on dreary Shakespeare like this and have never seen anything more cultivated than a leg-show since.

* * *

Although "Much Ado About Nothing" is no masterpiece, it comes out of the period of Shakespeare when he had finished the historfes and wanted to have some fun. He wrote "Twelfth Night" and "As You Like It" at about the same time when he was in his sunniest mood. But we may as well accept the fact that the day of the Shakespeare ritual is over—the canvas scenery made to look like a chromo, the insipid quadrilles, the bogus merriment of actors exchanging ha-ha-ha's, the whole mumbo-jumbo that derives from the nineteenth century.

Although you never would suspect it from the langours of last evening's performance, "Much Ado About Nothing" can be acted with some spirit and humor if the staging approximates the formal simplicity of the Elizabethan theatre, and the comedy is played as a story and not a succession of scenes. It was so acted at the Cleveland Playhouse two or three years ago, and it was heartily entertaining.

A lot of actors have conscientiously learned their lines to support Miss Luce, Mr. Eustrel and Mr. Cooper in the current journey through the text. For valor they deserve a kind word or two. The three stars have their big scenes and give good accounts of themselves as individual performers. Miss Luce is bright and coquettish—"lucent," Dogberry would say. Mr. Eustrel is manly and romantic. Mr. Cooper is broad and knavish.

But they never seem to be acting in the same play. For the production has no point of view that puts the details of the comedy into perspective. Everyone is interested in his part, but nobody is interested in the play as a whole. There is a certain forewarning in Shakespeare's careless title—"Much Ado About Nothing."

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

May 2, 1952

'Much Ado' at the Music Box

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Shakespeare was being literal when he called his comedy "Much Ado About Nothing." It goes on and on about mistaken identity, unreasonable rascality and interwoven plots until an audience is hard put to it to pay attention.

The direct result of the bard's scattered intentions is that the play can be performed successfully only by the most expert and authoritative not to say charming, cast imaginable.

The current company had best be described as willing.

Claire Luce as Beatrice.

Claire Luce plays Beatrice, who is a hothead and a smart alec, gets dismayed by her cousin's tragedy and tricked into marrying the man she pretends not to love. This is said to have been one of Ellen Terry's finest roles, and one can only dream of the wit and charm she must have brought to it.

For a while at the start it looked as if Miss Luce was going to have a fine time. But her quality is a sulky one, and her physical style has more design than authority.

Antony Eustrel, who directed, plays Benedict. Like Beatrice, he is led to believe that the one he loves, loves him, and he cannot escape, which suits him fine.

Cooper Wins Audience.

Melville Cooper has an unlucky habit of proving so good in dull productions that you know he could be just as good with real competition. As Dogberry, a Master Constable, he bites into his lines and hurls them out into the audience as no one else in the cast does.

He scored last night with the lackadaisical onlookers over and over.

DAILY NEWS

May 2, 1952

'Much Ado About Nothing' Seems To Need More Work by Its Author

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Call me a naughty man if you will, but I'm blessed if I don't think "Much Ado About Nothing" was William Shakespeare's "Hook 'n' Ladder"—a corny comedy padded with radio gags. At any rate, it seemed so last night at the Music Box, even with Claire Luce, a sexy blonde, as Beatrice, and Antony Eustrel, a fine figger of a man in Elizabethan tights, as Benedick. The only fun I got out of the play was from Melville Cooper's low-down performance of Dogberry—particularly at the moment when he instructed his constable, "Well, you are to call at all the ale-houses and bid those that are drunk get them to bed."

All the blame for this notice can be taken by Shakespeare and me, in that order, for Luther Greene's new production—the first one locally since 1932—is quite nice, with some attractive music by Raffaello deBanfield (there's a name for you!) and sets and costumes by Stewart Chaney. There is a particularly good performance of a villain, the Don John of the piece, by Carl Harbord, who seems to have more of a sense of theatre than many of his fellow players, including Jay Robinson.

Deirdre Owens is sweet as Hero, the maiden whose virtue is slandered, and Eric Sinclair is a pleasant youth as the man who loves her, Claudio. But it is my considered opinion that "Much Ado About Nothing" needs work. Too late to fix it though, I guess, unless Cole Porter wants to make a musical comedy out of it titled "Nothing Much About a Do."

"The Male Animal"

DAILY NEWS

May 1, 1952

'The Male Animal' in Revival, Is Funnier and Smarter Than Ever

By JOHN CHAPMAN

The season's funniest, most intelligent and most up-to-date comedy is a 12-year-old piece by James Thurber and Elliott Nugent, "The Male Animal," which was given a capital revival last evening at the City Center. Its comedy is hilarious, and its wit is dry and penetrating. The company, headed by Elliott Nugent, Martha Scott and Robert Preston, couldn't be bettered, and Michael Gordon, the director, has done an extraordinarily good job of fitting the play and the players to the big Center stage.

"The Male Animal" was made by Thurber and Nugent out of affectionate memories of their student days at Ohio State University. It is funny, but it goes deeper than surface comedy as it relates the conflict between a young English prof, played by Nugent, and the organized forces of the campus philistines. The mild young prof gets into trouble by merely suggesting that he may read to his class a simple, touching letter by Bartolomeo Vanzetti. He finds himself in an unexpected battle with college trustees and football-minded alumni. This conflict seems more pointed today than it was in 1940.

All Kinds of Humor.

There is grand comedy in this piece, ranging from Eulabelle Moore's quite wonderful servant to Preston's hilarious scene which culminates in his description of a football maneuver called the Statue of Liberty play. There is excellent married-life humor in the troubles of Nugent and his delightful spouse, Miss Scott. One of the best drunk scenes ever written, in which the professor philosophizes about how the male animal, from the land crab and the seal on up, defends its home, is beautifully performed by Nugent and John Gerstad.

All the actors are capable and attractive, including Elliott's daughter, Nancy, in the role created by Gene Tierney; Halliwell Hobbes as a spunky old college dean, Matt Briggs in his old role of a football-daffy alumnus and Ruth McDevitt as an enchantingly nitwitted college wife. And it's grand to have Nugent back, untouched by the years that have worn so many of us into strange shapes, to play the young prof. He is one of the best comedians in the funny business—easy, sure and subtle.

According to present schedule "The Male Animal" is on for only two weeks. Seems a pity that it can run only sixteen times as long as the comedy which opened and closed the night before, "Hook 'n' Ladder."

"THE MALE ANIMAL"

Comedy by James Thurber and Elliott Nugent; staged by Michael Gordon; scenery by Melvin Bourne; costumes by Noel Taylor; revived by the New York City Theatre Company at City Center, April 30, 1952. The cast:

Cleota.....Eulabelle Moore
Ellen Turner.....Martha Scott
Tommy Turner...Elliott Nugent
Patricia Stanley...Nancy Nugent
Wally Myers.....Charles Boaz
Dean Frederick Damon.....
Halliwell Hobbes
Michael Barnes...John Gerstad
Joe Ferguson...Robert Preston
Mrs. Blanche Damon.....
Ruth McDevitt
Ed Keller.....Matt Briggs
Myrtle Keller...Regina Wallace
"Nutsy" Miller....Billy James
Newspaper Reporter.....
Peter Harris

New York Post

May 1, 1952

By Richard Watts Jr.

The Return of an Engaging Comedy

After 12 years, "The Male Animal" remains a fresh, intelligent and engaging comedy. The successful play of 1940, in which James Thurber and Elliott Nugent combined sex and football with a defense of academic freedom, was revived last night as the first item in the City Center's spring drama season, with Mr. Nugent again enacting his original role, and it demonstrated pleasantly that those of us who joined in the cheering for the Thurber - Nugent collaboration when we first saw it were by no means mistaken. The passing of the years has not deprived it of its charm, humor and zest.

Certainly no one can say that its basic theme, which has to do with the right of a college English instructor to read to his students a literary masterpiece written by a notorious radical, has become dated in the interim. That, in at least this respect, the play has grown even more timely than it seemed in 1940 is suggested by the ironic fact that, in the current version, the authors have felt called upon to introduce into their modestly liberal comedy a new speech in which the slightly radical college editor is permitted to deny he is a Communist. As I recall it, nobody suspected him of being one in 1940.

Point of View

Although "The Male Animal" does have a friendly word to say for academic freedom and permits its central character to read aloud the famous and beautiful letter written by the executed Vanzetti, it is most assuredly neither a propagandist play of any kind nor one given to being stridently liberal. Its liberalism arises from no insistence on an editorial point of view, but rather from its calm, urbane and reasonable temper and its pleasant mellowness of spirit. Its eminent authors are, indeed, considerably less interested in their own social viewpoint than in their amused contemplation of human weaknesses.

As a matter of fact, its most sympathetic character is, not the liberal teacher of English and admirer of Vanzetti's eloquent prose, but the unfortunate ex-football player, who merely wants to come back to his old college after 15 years and see his alma mater win the big game but finds himself innocently enmeshed in the domestic squabble of the teacher and his wife. Not since the hapless Mercutio got fatally entangled in a family brawl has the plight of the innocent bystander been studied more compassionately, and the real hero of "The Male Animal" is Whirling Joe Ferguson, the hapless ex-backfield star.

Alcohol and Animals

There are times in the course of the play's third act when the going doesn't seem quite as lively as it did 12 years ago, but, when the authors are at their best, as in the episode where the teacher and the student editor have an alcoholic discussion of animals and sex, they are a joy to listen to. That particular scene seems pure Thurber, and, therefore, the famous incident in which the ex-athlete loses his teacup while trying to illustrate the Statue of Liberty play, remains one of the theater's great pieces of comic business. There is a fine amount of good fun in "The Male Animal."

It may be said, too, of the play that it fits comfortably on the stage of the City Center, which hasn't always proved true of more classic works. The acting is helpful, with Mr. Nugent looking as young and playing as engagingly as ever, and Robert Preston portraying bewildered Whirling Joe well enough to please even those of us who recall Leon Ames' brilliant creation of the part. Martha Scott is all right as the wife, Halliwell Hobbes plays the peaceful old teacher of English excellently, and Matt Briggs again scowls his way effectively through his original part of the reactionary trustee. I was glad to see "The Male Animal" looking so fit.

The New York Times

May 1, 1952

'The Male Animal,' by Thurber and Nugent, Put On at the City Center

By BROOKS ATKINSON

If "The Male Animal" seems funnier now than it did twelve years ago, everything else in the world must have been going backward. This is the comedy James Thurber and Elliott Nugent wrote in 1940, managing somehow to make everything confusing and hilarious. The new production, which opened at The City Center last evening, is wonderfully well-staged and acted and rolls along through the three acts on a groundswell of laughter. Nobody has had quite so much fun in the City Center for quite a long time.

Perhaps that is because no character in the play cracks a smile. They are all deadly serious, equally concerned over the Statue of Liberty play in a football game and the last letter written by Vanzetti. For Mr. Thurber and Mr. Nugent have put together a highly articulate comedy in which no character ever understands what the other is saying.

* * *

Since two of them are college teachers and the others are present or recent dwellers on the campus, this gap between words and understanding may seem a little bewildering. But it is the genius of the uproarious hassle Mr. Thurber and Mr. Nugent have stirred up about academic freedom, marriage, the obtuseness of trustees and the perennial adolescence of ex-football players. All the characters in "The Male Animal" are egotists, and all of them are at each other's throats all evening.

For this is no assembly of wisecracks and snappy gibes, but a true comedy about the infirmities of human nature. It is as pertinent now as it ever was. Since no one else is writing stuff of equal merit, it is funnier. Probably it would be difficult today for a writer to be as relaxed and detached as Mr. Thurber and Mr. Nugent were twelve years ago, before the war split the world wide open.

* * *

Nor is the performance at the City Center a hand-me-down from brighter days. Under Michael Gordon's direction, it has enormous freshness and exuberance. Elliott Nugent has come back to play the rebellious professor whose intellectual valor seems so inadequate in comparison with the hearty assurance of old football heroes. Matt Briggs is also repeating his immortal performance as the fanatical trustee who does not want his alma mater traduced with ideas.

But the new people are excellent, too. As the legendary halfback, Robert Preston is a happy choice. His noisy bewilderment is continuously comic and his feverish energy keeps the whole performance brisk and crack-brained. Martha Scott gives her best performance for years as the wife out of her mind with outraged temperament. And Halliwell Hobbes is dazed and droll as the elderly dean who hates trouble.

As a matter of fact, everyone is in fine fettle—John Gerstad as the unconfused liberal student, Nancy Nugent as his hot-tempered girl friend, Ruth McDevitt as a preoccupied wife of the dean, Regina Wallace as a trustee's wife and Eulabelle Moore as the resentful maid. For scenery, Melvin Bourne has designed and lighted a cheerful living room ample enough to absorb the antics of a castful of educated knaves, and Noel Taylor has dressed them appropriately.

To see "The Male Animal" is to realize that writing a comedy is the simplest thing in the world. All you have to do is to know your characters, see them through a lunatic haze, record their behavior in times of great excitement, have some principles of your own and understand the theatre thoroughly. In performance as well as in writing, "The Male Animal" is the funniest play of the season.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

May 1, 1952

'The Male Animal' Still Funny

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

The City Center last night opened its spring comedy season with a fine production of the perennial favorite "The Male Animal." If staying funny through the years proves anything, this show is becoming a minor classic.

Written and originally produced in 1940, it is highly interesting to see how different a treatment was given the subject of academic liberalism, than would be likely nowadays.

Even such a recent dramatic discussion of scholastic freedom as "Goodby, My Fancy" seems solemn compared to "Male Animal." And it is a good thing to see the whole subject worked over with a good kneading, while everybody keeps on laughing.

Recipe for Hilarity.

Here a mild-mannered professor, interested in showing how emotion, not learning, can produce fine writing, considers reading a letter of Vanzetti's to his English class. The idea is snatched up by a student and made the subject of a violent editorial against the trustees who have recently dismissed several professors for suspected, though unproven, Red tendencies.

In a few hours the professor has become an unwilling storm center, breaks with his wife, sees her tempted by an ex-football hero, and proves himself a male in the most savage sense.

Nugent Is Back.

Michael Gordon has given the comedy a fine job of direction, spreading it just the right extent for the Center. The playing is authoritative, tasteful and sure.

The cast is as good as it is possible to imagine. Elliott Nugent, who wrote the play with James Thurber, is back in his original role as the professor. Like the others he has the wit and wisdom to play it all very earnestly with delightful results.

Martha Scott is warm and feminine as his exasperated wife. But the surprising element of the production is the wonderfully funny and knowing performance of Robert Preston as the old beau who is still an all-American at heart.

Halliwell Hobbes gets repeated laughs with his treatment of a good-humored older teacher, and Matt Briggs is the epitome of stubborn intolerance as a trustee. Ruth McDevitt and Regina Wallace make the most of a cocktail party scene, and John Gerstad and Nancy Nugent are highly agreeable as younger romantics.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

May 1, 1952

'The Male Animal'

By WALTER F. KERR

IT'S certainly good to hear genuine laughter in the theater again. City Center opened its spring season Wednesday night with a revival of the James Thurber-Elliott Nugent "Male Animal," and what seemed an attractive though lightweight comedy in 1940 turned up as one of the brighter spots of 1952.

In case you've forgotten, "The Male Animal" explores the battle of the sexes over a college week end. Professor Tommy Turner is a mild-mannered intellectual whose placid domestic life is disrupted by a former football hero who has come back for the big game and, in passing, another look at Tommy's wife. How the bedraggled bookworm manages to take off his glasses and rise to the defense of his nest is pretty much the substance of the play, and a very funny play it still is.

For some reason or other, this reviewer had always remembered the play as more Nugent than Thurber. It is neatly constructed along stock-company lines, and seemed to bear a greater spiritual relationship to "Kempy" — and those other reliable farces turned out by Elliott and his father, J. C, —than to something like "Men, Women and Dogs." It seems, however, that I was quite wrong. There are great gobs of Thurber all over the place, from the notion of Tommy Turner peering through ferns while his girl danced with another guy, to the fine visual insanity of two men comparing halves of a doorknob.

There is Thurber macabre ("Not serious? They took a pint of pus out of her!"), Thurber mental ("I go through such a lot with your mind") and Thurber waspish ("I hope we are not going to alienate the many friends of Abraham Lincoln.")

And there is Elliott Nugent on stage to look as seedy, as owlish, and as wonderfully perplexed as any Thurber drawing. Mr. Nugent's comic style is a magnificent one. He shuffles on stage, frowns fretfully and, in general suggests that he really had something else to do tonight. Shortly thereafter you discover—or remember— that what seems a casual technique is actually a pinpoint one and that the random comedian can drop an explosive line with majestic ac-

curacy.

The manner in which he suggests the granite, the male fortitude, which lurks behind a mousy exterior is delectable. He reveals it in the simple confidence with which he explains to his football rival that he is mutterably dumb, in the solemnity with which he clears away the furniture so as to do physical battle, in the fierce belligerence with which he finally leads his wife through some dance steps.

The rest of City Center's company is top-flight, too. Robert Preston is endlessly funny as the professionally vigorous ex-athlete. He makes a very good thing out of the set piece in which he diagrams a football game on the living-room floor, and an even better one out of the running gag built around a mysteriously vanishing tea-cup.

Martha Scott manages to make a very appealing wife for Tommy Turner without sacrificing any of the dim-witted comedy the authors had in mind. Ruth McDevitt turns a matronly bit into choice fun, Matt Briggs is back at his old stand as a foolishly sinister college trustee, and Halliwell Hobbes does beautifully by the brief but biting role of a tartly philosophical old dean.

True, the play has its thin stretches here and there. The domestic flare-up which sets the second act into motion has a wildly contrived air about it, but even this quickly turns into an honestly funny battle of non sequiturs. And the play may even profit from the one element which might have been thought to date it. "The Male Animal" uses the faintly serious thread of academic freedom as a sort of ballast to its foolishness. What may have seemed an unnecessary worry in 1940 has a great deal more pertinence now. The extra weight is real, and it rounds out a satisfying evening.

This one is a bargain.

Daily Mirror

May 1, 1952

'Male Animal' Revival Up-to-Date and Funny

By ROBERT COLEMAN

The New York City Theatre Company launched a Spring comedy season at the City Center last evening with a wonderfully entertaining revival of "The Male Animal." It is a most pleasant duty to tell you that the James Thurber-Elliott Nugent script seems as up-to-date, as timeless, as it did back in 1940.

It also seems funnier, if possible. That could be due to the fact that the original production emphasized viewpoint rather than stage business. Director Michael Gordon has had to broaden the playing to match the vastness of the big house in West 55th Street, and what might easily have proved a liability has become an asset.

Artistic director George Schaefer has provided a fine cast. He has lured co-author Nugent, Martha Scott and Robert Preston back from Hollywood to spark what are called the leading roles. However, even the lesser roles are important, thanks to the deft acting of Halliwell Hobbes, Matt Briggs, John Gerstad, Regina Wallace, Ruth McDevitt, Eulabelle Moore, Charles Boaz and Nancy Nugent.

Elliott Nugent, like "The Male Animal," hasn't aged at all. He looks as young as when we first saw him trotting around a track at a rehearsal of "The Poor Nut." And that was too many years ago. He is eminently right for the part of the mild professor who turns tiger when an old rival, an ex-football player, threatens to break up his home.

Of course, he has been drawn from his ivory tower via the bottle and a provocative editorial in the campus magazine by one of his students. It hasn't occurred to him until then that even a gridiron-minded trustee might think him a radical. But, once challenged, he is determined to defend his intellectual integrity.

The drinking scene could readily have become downright silly, but in the skilled hands of Nugent, Miss Scott, Preston and Gerstad, it is hilarious. Young Miss Nugent has taken time off from a commercial art career to join her distinguished father in what for this sentimentalist, is a heart-warming reunion.

"The Male Animal" is a laugh—and thought-packed frolic. It offers as human and amusing a night of playgoing as you can find the length of Broadway. We are in the debt of the philanthropic players who are accepting minimum salaries for their current appearances. That's why you are privileged to enjoy the revival at a $3 top.

Journal-American

May 1, 1952

Entirely Hilarious And Rewarding

By JOHN McCLAIN

IT is a pleasure to hail "The Male Animal," which was presented at the New York City Center Theatre last night, as an entirely hilarious and rewarding comedy.

Although a revival, (as what, this season, isn't?), it has worn well through the years; the lines and situations of James Thurber and Elliott Nugent, the authors, are as beguiling and oblique as they were a decade ago, the present performances are consistently commendable.

Even Robert Preston, a movie actor, maintains his stature with Nugent and Martha Scott in the star billing.

The plot isn't highly significant, but it's good; the writing is always adult.

* * *

On Hot Spot

The story concerns a college professor who finds himself in a spot for two reasons: he is in trouble with the trustees because of an announcement that he intends to read an allegedly pro-Red document in his classes, and he also is about to lose his wife to a former football hero.

His reactions to these two crises are: he will defend his right to read the liberal tract to his dying day and he will sit down and "talk out" his situation with the gridiron gladiator. It is because of this latter decision that the title of the play, including its most dramatic interludes, ensues.

In a highly unsober moment he arrives at the conclusion that the human male, like an animal, must physically protect its mate. Which leads, of course, to the inevitable conflict with the ex-All American. As it turns out he is vanquished though strangely victorious. His wife understands why, finally, and everybody lives happily ever after.

This is an ingenious structure and the minor bits of business which makes it memorable are numerous. There is the football hero who enacts the Statue-of-Liberty play and never quite figures out what became of the teacup he was using as the ball. And the dozen-odd instances proving that the human race is fighting a losing war against inanimate objects, like the door-knob which collapses when two people are pulling it from opposite directions.

* * *

Nugent Excellent

BUT ALL THIS would not be salutary without the services of Elliott Nugent, delivering the best performance of his career as the professor. You feel he's really known such a fellow.

Martha Scott, as his wife, is properly attractive and unobtrusive. Robert Preston, as noted before, turns in an extremely sympathetic job as the football hero, thus out-scoring most of his Hollywood teammates who have appeared in local competition earlier this season.

Additional plaudits should be delivered to John Gerstad, Halliwell Hobbes and Eulabelle Moore, for their participation in the proceedings. And to Michael Gordon for his fluent direction.

"Hook 'n Ladder"

New York World-Telegram and The ~~Evening~~ Sun

April 30, 1952

Graft Bows to Ethics In 'Hook 'n Ladder'

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Buried under a lugubrious mass of dialog called "Hook 'n Ladder," there is a fairly amusing idea for a slick magazine short story.

It would tell how three fire engine salesmen failed in their calling when they followed the graft-encrusted protocol they accepted as the ethics of their business. When forced by circumstances into honest competition, they deliver the goods and all end up rich.

One-Act Caliber.

At best this idea does not suggest more than a one-act play. As presented last night, it is strung out with every trite trimming known to desperate playwrights.

At the first intermission, one man ran shouting down the street, "This is worse than the Inquisition!" and was seen no more. Even the backers, who seemed to sprinkle the house liberally, found it pretty tough to laugh. Some of the customers, convinced that walking out was rude, compromised by walking up and down the aisles.

The type of humor may be illustrated by the couplet, "She's just a home girl," followed by "Then why don't they put her in a home?"

They Tried, Anyway.

The actors probably would prefer to be discussed under assumed names. The best known is Vicki Cummings.

She established her opinion of this play with her first line, and from then on behaved like a sporting if unwilling trouper.

"HOOK 'N LADDER"

Comedy by Charles Horner and Henry Miles; staged by Al Moritz; scenery by Eldon Elder; costumes by Jerry Boxhorn; presented by Mr. Moritz at the Royale Theatre, April 29, 1952. The cast:

Sam Ross.....Judson Pratt
Ulysses.....Guy Raymond
Steve Barton.....Charles Bang
Christine Rapp..Vicki Cummings
Caspar Armbruster.....
Harry Sothern
Doc Cornwall..Charles G. Martin
Mayor Tiddle.....
Leland Stanford Harris
Gail Carter.....Loretta Price
Mr. Deaton....Humphrey Davis
Mr. Gilkens.....Allan Hale
George Casey.....
Donald McClelland
J. B. Carpenter.....Alan Lee

The rest of the cast did its level best.

DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK'S PICTURE NEWSPAPER

April 30, 1952

A New Comedy, 'Hook 'n' Ladder,' Proves All Wet at No-Alarm Fire

By JOHN CHAPMAN

In the back of the Playbill for the Royale Theatre, where a comedy titled "Hook 'n' Ladder" opened last evening, are the biographies of the actors implicated. This little who's-who says, for example, that Judson Pratt "had just made his debut in 'Popsy' when World War II broke out and claimed him for five years as a radio operator-gunner in B-24s with the Fifth Air Force." The Playbill further declares that one Charles Bang was an Air Force staff sergeant, was shot down over Germany and confined to Stalag 17 in Austria, "where he produced, directed or acted in more than 30 prisoner-of-war plays."

Ah, those happy days! Imagine Pratt just sailing off in a bomber with nothing to do but listen to the radio and shoot a gun at a German once in a while! Imagine the lucky Bang, directing or acting in plays in a comfortable Stalag! It must have been a great life—but last evening the boys were really having it; they were acting in "Hook 'n' Ladder" at the Royale on 45th St., New York. It just goes to show you what a dirty trick life can play on a couple of nice fellows.

For Godfrey's Sake!

This comedy, by Charles Horner and Henry Miles, must be seen to be disbelieved, and you must scurry if you want to catch it. The plot has something to do with selling a fire engine to a small town and it is just about the dreariest concoction I have witnessed in 25 years of attending the so-called professional New York theatre. My sympathy for Vicki Cummings, the principal player, is enormous, for Miss Cummings is a comedienne of grit and spirit who should not be subjected to such indignities as "Hook 'n' Ladder."

I made only one note about the funny dialogue, which runs, "If I didn't have so much ambition I'd be a writer." This must have been a true collaboration between Messrs. Horner and Miles, whose ambition is now—or was last night—demonstrably enormous. I have been given to understand that on the side these gentlemen write wireless material for Arthur Godfrey.

The New York Times

April 30, 1952

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

At the close of the first act of "Hook 'n Ladder," which was put on at the Royale last evening, George Jean Nathan rose with considerable elegance and silence and went home. At the close of the second act another critic tried to slip away without being observed by his colleagues. Since he is gainfully employed, his name will be held in escrow to protect him from the crude vengeance of the boss.

"Hook 'n Ladder," written by Charles Horner and Henry Miles, has one attractive idea. The salesmen for a fire apparatus manufacturer are afraid that it may be illegal to sell fire engines to politicians without paying graft. This idea just about completes the authors' contribution to the gaiety of the nations, their craftsmanship is so sophomoric.

Vicki Cummings is in it, lifting her eyebrows in comic despair, shrugging her shoulders and making other ironic gestures. This is always consoling, for Miss Cummings has the knack of looking as though everything were tumultuously funny. Sometime a comedy is bound to be as bright as she is, and Mr. Nathan can afford to attend the third act.

New York Post

April 30, 1952

By Richard Watts Jr.

How Much Can the Theater Endure?

The theater has survived many disasters, and so I suppose it will not be fatally stricken by an ugly little catastrophe called "Hook 'n Ladder," which it underwent at the Royale last night. But, durable, dauntless and accustomed to body blows as it is, there is a limit to what it can endure, and that limit was dangerously approached in the incredibly melancholy antic that a couple of radio writers named Charles Horner and Henry Miles have concocted for it.

"Hook 'n Ladder" is, at least nominally, a farce. It is about two men and a woman who are trying to sell a new fire engine to a town known as Cloverdale, and find, apparently to their consternation, that the city fathers are expecting something in the way of graft. There is a lot of rushing in and out and slamming of doors, and, in the course of the merry proceedings, the comic Mayor, who drinks, is concealed by the trio in a closet and, then, in a portable shower bath.

Perverse Genius

To give the Messrs. Horner and Miles credit, there must be a kind of horrible, sinister genius in the ability to strive so fiercely to be comic and to miss so completely, so consistently and by such a huge margin. You would think that, by sheer accident and the law of averages, they would hit on something just a little bit funny occasionally. If, however, they were ever tempted by any such peril, they have certainly eluded it manfully.

Indeed, "Hook 'n Ladder" is so insistently dismal that it would hardly be worth contemplating at even this length if it were not that, in a way, it is so characteristic of a particularly discouraging phenomenon of the contemporary American theater. The fact is that no one concerned with it seems able to write an even passable farce any longer. It used to be that we could depend, every season or so, on getting a good, rough-and-tumble stage antic with a touch of gayety, skill and high spirits in it, but those days appear gone and forgotten.

A Comparison

I don't suppose that, judged by the loftiest and most austere of critical standards, "Room Service" was a work of any particular artistic magnitude. But it was alive, ingenious, wonderfully inventive in writing and in business, and filled with zest, excitement and genuine hilarity. In contrast to the occasional current efforts in the same field, it begins to emerge as akin to a masterpiece. It can't be just the grimness of our time that has destroyed the farce writers.

There is certainly no point in blaming the actors for what happened last night. They weren't very impressive as they went about their massive labors, but no one could expect them to be. In happier circumstances, at least Vicki Cummings, Donald McClelland and possibly Guy Raymond would know their way around in the atmosphere of farce, and a few of the others might have been bearable. The poor, old, long-suffering theater has had a doleful blow inflicted on it.

New York Herald Tribune

April 30, 1952

'Hook 'n' Ladder'

By WALTER F. KERR

SOME plays make you wait all evening to find out just how desperately bad they are. "Hook 'n Ladder," the new farce by Charles Horner and Henry Miles, indulges in no such pretty pretenses. It comes right out with its horrid little secret at the rise of the curtain, and pursues its witless way with astonishing consistency thereafter.

The opening laugh-getter consists of a gentleman in a hotel room with an ice pack on his head. This is quickly followed up by the arrival of a low comedy servant, whose name turns out to be Ulysses. Before we have quite caught our breath, a mature man has stomped on stage in the knee breeches of a Buffalo Boys uniform.

Things go right on in this rich, heady fashion. The leading lady makes a bed by crawling all over it. An FBI man prowls through the play on cue. A drunken mayor livens up the party with a concoction of his own called Old Factory Whistle—"one blast and you're through for the day." There is a chaise longue with a built-in bathtub, and I leave to your imagination the fun Messrs. Horner and Miles have with that. When all else fails, people are locked in closets and forgotten about. And there is even a prolonged funfest with an old-fashioned tripod camera. "Right out of the Stone Age" is the way one of the characters describes this last article, and she might, with no exaggeration at all, have been speaking for the play as well. In short, "Hook 'n' Ladder" is going to be just as depressing in the summer theaters as it was at the Royale Tuesday night.

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The plot, just to put it on the record, has to do with a trio of fire-engine salesmen who have invaded a small town, given their all in the way of wining, dining, and offering samba lessons to the local officials, and then been confronted with the fact that each of the officials wants a substantial bribe before the deal can be consummated. The mayor would like a new barber chair, the safety director has a speed boat in mind, the service director yearns for a Texas saddle worth about four hundred bucks, and even the town clerk, who wistfully explains that he has never received a gift before, dreams of a new grape arbor for his wife.

The rest of the play deals with the antic means by which the trio restore honor and free enterprise to the village. This was mostly accomplished, so far as I could judge, by having five members of the company don slickers and fire helmets and charge about the stage brandishing axes.

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The verbal humor, as distinguished from the physical fun, is so uniformly lame as to make it difficult to quote even the bad jokes. I have, however, dredged up one. When a phone call comes through for a man who is at the moment unconscious, it is at once jocularly explained that "He's in but he's out." That should hold you.

It is customary, in affairs of this kind, to offer sympathy to the actors and to explain that they were obviously talented people trapped in trying circumstances. As a matter of fact, though, most of the actors who adorn "Hook 'n Ladder" aren't very good either. Harry Sothern has some pleasant moments as a timid town clerk—I needn't tell you he is called Caspar—and Guy Raymond manages the stock hick servant with a minimum of pain. Vicki Cummings works her nasal growl for all it is worth, makes wry faces to cover for the more lamentable jokes, but in general can do little more than blink her eyes and shake her head as though understandably stunned by it all. "We're all in this mess together," she keeps muttering, leaving a reviewer with practically nothing more to say.

It's plays like "Hook 'N Ladder" that give failures a bad name.